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The Wabash and Its Valley

Part II—Settlement and Early Development

THE treaty of St. Mary's, made in 1818, which gave to the United States government the whole interior portion of Indiana, threw open to settlement the greater part of the upper Wabash valley. In the "New Purchase" there were, according to a writer of that time (Dana), some 8,500,000 acres, and emigration could not spread over that vast area in a day; but by the early twenties, nevertheless, the "land hunter" had penetrated to the Wabash bottoms, attracted thither by the wonderful fertility and other advantages of that region. A tract receding twenty to forty miles from the river on either side comprised the "valley," and throughout this tract were magnificent forests interspersed with beautiful prairies luxuriant with growths of waving grass, prodigally gay with countless flowers, and with a soil practically bottomless. More than that, the noble Wabash promised communication with the remote outer world, and all things pointed to an opulent future. In 1824 the land office for the sale of Wabash lands was opened at Crawfordsville, then the only settlement between Terre Haute and Fort Wayne. A mixed population from the eastern and southern portions of the State and from Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and other sections, came pouring in, and the coveted localities were rapidly taken up at the government price of \$1.25 per acre. Among these pioneers the honest home-seekers were so far in the ascendency that speculators were obliged to be wary and content themselves with second choice, but they were amply in evidence, nevertheless. Immediately on the heels of these first purchases came the craze for the establishment of towns that were to be future emporiums, and for the following decade they sprang up like mushrooms along the river, each big with ambition and hope, and each envious of the others. The founding of a prospective city seems to have been a very simple performance, consisting chiefly in laying off one's purchase into "town lots," and booming the same in various and divers ways. The first requisite was that the location be at a ford of the river as a likely place for the establishing of a steamboat

dock. The beginning of Lafayette is an example. William Digby purchased a piece of land so thickly grown with hazel, and plum brush, and grape vines that the surveyor had great difficulty in doing his work. After creating a "town" by laying out this ground and naming it Lafayette, in honor of the illustrious Frenchman, Digby sold most of the site to Samuel Sargeant for the sum of \$240, and Sargeant began his little "boom" by getting some of the influential Crawfordsville citizens interested in it. A few cabins went up, but it was uncertain for a good while whether the embryo city would live through its beginning. An ironical wag of another settlement jeeringly dubbed it "Lay Flat," or "Laugh At," and threatened to "grease it with a bacon rind so that the next dog that came by might eat it." Time and unforeseen circumstances, however, turned the tables, and eventually Lafayette looked proudly down upon all of her rivals. Of these ambitious towns some have passed, not only from existence, but from the very memory of the succeeding generation, and others, overborne by the trend of events, have long since ceased to aspire.

The making of Lafayette was the fact of its location at the head of navigation. Steamboats from New Orleans, bringing commodities to the heart of this new country, could not penetrate beyond the mouth of the Tippecanoe, and so "Lay Flat" became the great receiving and distributing point for the country about, which drained into it a vast surplus of grain and hogs. During the thirties it was the largest and most important city northwest of Cincinnati; its streets were crowded with teams; some coming from as far east as the Ohio state line, and one writer tells us of no less than sixteen steamboats lying at her wharves at one time.

Despite the thrift at this point, however, the country above developed slowly because of inadequate communication with the outer world. Towns farther up the river, such as Logansport and Peru, were constrained to "play second fiddle" to their more fortunate rival, and the desire of these places to have navigation reach them was so desperate as to be ludicrous. A bonus of several hundred dollars was offered to the first steamboat captain who would prove such navigability, and heroic efforts were made to that end. In June of 1834, the water being high, a little

steamer called the Republican "set sail" from Lafayette, bound for Logansport. She proceeded without trouble as far as Delphi, then began to stick on various sandbars, at each of which delays the passengers would render assistance by getting out into the water and pushing, or by extending a long rope to shore and pulling. Several days were expended at this arduous toil, much to the entertainment of throngs of Indians, men, women and children, who loitered along the banks admiring the strange craft. Eventually, a dozen yoke of oxen were brought down from Logansport and the Republican hauled bodily over ripples and sandbars to her destination. The boat was ruined and left to rot in the bottom of the river at the newly-established head of navigation, and whether the bonus received compensated the captain for his loss history does not say. A year later another boat, the Science, made the attempt. The water being unusually high, Logansport was safely reached. Here a lot of additional passengers were taken on, and the Science went merrily on and up. Trying to ascend a rapids the swift current got control of the boat, which, carried helplessly backward, narrowly escaped being battered to pieces, much to the terror and panic of those on board. Returning to Logansport, they unloaded about two hundred barrels of flour and salt; then the passengers walked around the rapids, meeting the boat above, and at length Peru was made. Here a fracas occurred between some of the Peruvians and a part of the Logansport contingent; a crowd of bellicose Irishmen, who were working on the canal there, unable to resist this opportunity to indulge their favorite passion, came to take a hand, and the captain of the Science, deeming prudence a virtue, "put to sea" again, leaving part of his passengers to find their way back home as best they could. Excursions in those days were even more delightful than they are now.*

But the day of glory for this region was yet to dawn. The grand scheme for the internal improvement of Indiana, projected as early as the twenties, contemplated, first of all, a navigable waterway that should connect Lake Erie with the lower Wabash, and in time this dream became a fact. In 1843 the great Wabash

*Much of the above information is got from Sanford Cox's "Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley"—one of our best and most entertaining books of local reminiscences.

and Erie canal, after long labor and many ups and downs, was completed, and the occasion duly commemorated by barbecues, speeches and general rejoicings. A large number of freight and packet boats at once made their appearance, infusing new life into all the little river towns. The abundant agricultural wealth of the Wabash country now found comparatively cheap and easy transportation directly to the East; the regions north and south for a distance of fifty to a hundred miles gravitated to this outlet, and from the Illinois country, westward, to Lafayette came flocking the great prairie schooners laden with their contributions to the world's marts. Westward, in turn, came the capacious freight boats laden with merchandise of all kinds, and the packets with emigrants who, now having access to this land of promise, came in an uninterrupted tide, adding to the new currents of life. Towns along the river which, heretofore, could have only a broken and restricted intercourse with each other, were now regularly connected, and traveling was made possible to the multitude. And it was idyllic and picturesque traveling. People not given to the frantic haste of the present day were content to spend leisurely hours sitting in pleasant company on the deck or in the cabin of the smoothly-gliding packet. Passengers got acquainted and fraternized, played games, discoursed, argued, and, no doubt, made love, and when the boat was delayed it was quite common for congenial couples or groups to step off and stroll on ahead, gathering wild flowers as they went. Yet movement, bustle and excitement, were not lacking. The speed of the best packets was about eight miles an hour, and one writer gives us a picture of the swaggering driver in a slouch hat and top boots, lashing his team to a sharp trot. On approaching a town there was a great blowing of horns from the deck, and when dock was made everybody went ashore to mingle with the townsmen, to ask and answer innumerable questions, and to descend upon the public houses, presumably for fluid refreshments. When the boat was ready to go a horn was blown again to warn the passengers aboard, and on they fared to the next stopping place.

An Englishman named Beste, who, with his family, traveled through here early in the fifties, describes his trip from Terre

Haute to the lake and gives interesting glimpses of the people.* Being an Englishman of position this traveler could not understand the rather brusque anti-aristocratic notions which frequently shocked and pained him. The children, according to him, were independent and pert, while their elders were inordinately jealous of their doctrine of equality and rights, and he dwells with some severity on their rudenesses and crudenesses. Among other things, he mentions that the chewing of "Burgandy pitch" was a universal habit among the women.

The ordinary course of travel was sometimes retarded by mishaps to the canal, which, at some points, ran between levees or dikes, instead of through an excavated channel, and not infrequently these levees, springing a leak, let the water unceremoniously into the low lands without, in which case the boats lay in the mud till the break was repaired. Among the unusual happenings recounted is that of the wreck of the packet boat Kentucky, in 1844. A mill-dam giving way in the high country back from the canal let loose a great flood which, sweeping down to the canal, broke through the tow-path at one of these embanked points. The packet mentioned was carried bodily through the gap, washed down into the river bottoms, which were submerged with a freshet, and broken to pieces among the trees. Three of the passengers were drowned. The others were rescued by the people of the vicinity, but the baggage and mails were swept away and lost.

The canal was continued south to Evansville, but the lower part never attained an importance comparable to the upper, and soon fell into disuse. And the upper part, incalculably important though it was in its time, was destined to speedily have its day. It was some eleven years in the making, and thirteen years later the Toledo & Wabash Railroad was completed along its line to Lafayette. The ushering in of the railroad era gave a new turn to the tide of affairs; now all is changed, and the old picturesque phase of life which formed so interesting a chapter in our State's history is all but forgotten, save by the lingering remnants of the past generation.—G. S. C.

*"The Wabash, or, Adventures of an English Gentleman's Family in the Interior of America," by J. Richard Beste, Esq.